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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000338

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SUBJECT: TILTING AT WINDMILLS

Classified By: A/DCM D.C. McCullough, reasons para 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Kamal Hossain is the principal drafter of Bangladesh's constitution and the country's most prominent civil libertarian. Foreign minister in Sheikh Mujib's government, he left the Awami League, he says, to protest the AL's embrace of black money and thugery in post-Ershad politics. As chairman of the Gono Forum, he is now part of the AL-led 14-party opposition alliance. He recently sat down with us for three hours to discuss topical issues.

¶2. (C) Highlights follow:

WHAT IS THE GONO FORUM?

When I was with the AL, I felt they were falling into the prevailing pattern of money politics. In the 1960s, there was a lot of idealism in politics. As students, we worked for a higher cause than power and connected to the people with personal contact. The AL expected to win the 1991 election, and when it lost, it decided it had to adapt and turn to professional politicians. Ershad's contribution to politics was the injection of mercenaries and the institutionalization of corruption and money politics. He sent brigadiers to places like Indonesia who came back and set up the same kind of organizations they saw there to enrich themselves and control the opposition. I wanted to rescue our politics from money and arms, and to get a parliament that works. But people in the AL said this was old fashioned, that the BNP followed Ershad's approach, that it played the religion and anti-India cards to divide the people and that's why it won. They concluded that the AL must fight fire with fire. I finally left the AL in 1993 to avoid physical confrontation, and started the Gono (People's) Forum to promote reform politics, to fight for hearts and minds, house to house, neighborhood by neighborhood.

WHAT ARE YOUR CURRENT POLITICAL ASPIRATIONS?

The 14-party opposition alliance says it supports our principles, but we're severely handicapped by not having big money. Anyone will tell you that to win in a big city like Dhaka, a candidate needs three to four crore taka (about USD 500,000 to 650,000). When I ran in Mirpur, and lost, in 1991, the cost was less than five lakh taka. Politicians say that Bangladesh is Third World, not London, and that our people are illiterate. I say people were more illiterate in the 1960s and this kind of cynicism has institutionalized sick politics. They call themselves professional politicians. I call them criminals. People yearn to be rid of this type of politics. My goal is to get democratic alliances to create a new politics. This time is far away, but I will not contest in the type of environment we have today.

FORMER PRESIDENT B. CHOWDHURY'S BDP SEEMS TO BE OFF TO A SLOW START.

It's hard to build a political party. It takes time. He expects there are dissidents in BNP who will join him. Also, Tariq's strategy of building a party within a party is creating visible tensions that he hopes will benefit him, that people who don't get BNP tickets will turn to him. Both the AL and the BNP have the same problem with people who don't get tickets going elsewhere. There is a good possibility that the 14-party alliance and BDP will work out an understanding to let the good man win, especially in the marginal seats. The situation should be clearer after one month.

IS THE AL SERIOUS ABOUT BOYCOTTING THE ELECTION?

I've been in close contact with Sheikh Hasina since July. I've told her to go back to parliament to give a voice to the 14 parties and to get our message across at home and to our foreign friends, and that going back would not be a sign of weakness but a more effective means of protest. I've always been a dissenter on hartals. What worked for us before was personal contact with the people, to go to the grassroots. She is serious about boycotting, but many people in the party are against it.

WHAT DOES THE AL HAVE TO DO TO WIN THE NEXT ELECTION?

If the AL could reverse what happened to them in 2001, if the AL can get personnel transfers undone, if it can work around

the Election Commission, then it can win. Hasina won't admit this because she sees her government as a golden era, but there is a strong anti-incumbency factor in this country. But the BNP overdid it in trying to make the playing field more level. In our politics, things that look like they are more procedural than substantive are still important because they can show that change is possible and that people won't be punished for opposing authoritarianism. There is a real potential for revenge if AL wins the election and doesn't have partners to urge restraint on it. Our strategy should be to win with a good coalition, not to go for a four-fifths majority.

WHAT IS YOUR VIEW OF JMB?

JMB has an ideology that does not care about democracy. JI believes that sharia law overrides any constitution, and it knows that bombs won't produce this outcome. Instead, it knows that JMB de-legitimizes them and is an obstacle to their goal of replacing the AL and BNP and to infiltrate educational and state institutions. JI appears rational and is politically opportunistic. My surmise is that JMB had interactions with the intelligence agencies until the suicide bomb attacks, but those attacks unified the country against this gross perversion of religion and politics. The mystery about the attacks is the timing. I don't think JI or BNP was behind the bombings.

WHAT DOES HASINA THINK?

She doesn't think JI or BNP was involved, but she thinks she has to say that as leader of the opposition and to create a climate that favors early elections.

YOU REPRESENT THE KIBRIA FAMILY. WHAT'S THE STATUS OF THAT CASE?

The government wants to quickly close the case, to get some lower down people tried and convicted, and declare the matter solved. Mrs. Quayyum came to see me to protest her husband's innocence. She said he is not so foolish or reckless to do something like this, and she indicated that he would have something interesting to say if he were allowed to speak in court that would implicate a senior person at the PMO.

INDICATED? WHAT DID SHE ACTUALLY SAY?

"He had wanted to say things but he couldn't." The rest is inference, but everybody talks about Haris Chowdhury because he is from that area, he had been there shortly before the attack, and he had said that BNP would do whatever it took to get all the seats in that area. That last part could be just political talk, but my point is that Quayyum should have been allowed to speak in court. Now that three of his co-defendants have retracted their confessions, there's no case against Quayyum and the government knows it. The timing is interesting: Quayyum wants to talk in court, and suddenly the confessions get recanted. Judges at this level are so politicized you never know what's going to happen next.

YOUR CRITICS CHARGE YOU HAVE VERY CLOSE TIES TO THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT.

Look at what I did when I was foreign minister. Whether it was about land or maritime boundaries, Bangladesh either came out on top or held its own on some very sensitive issues. But after 1975, I was abroad for five years, and the Indian agent theme is the broad brush the BNP uses against the AL. We have to have good relations with our neighbors, but without sacrificing our interests and principles.

HOW DO YOU VIEW THE RECENT ELECTION COMMISSION CONTROVERSY?

It's so gross, the way the new commissioners vilified the court. They must have a simple mandate to deliver the election for the BNP. Zakaria (the former EC secretary and one of the new commissioners) is a criminal who worked with the PMO against the last Chief Election Commissioner. The voter list has more than 70 million names and is on computer. It just makes sense to update that list instead of creating a brand new one, especially if you have only 30 days to do the vetting. To do something opposite to this raises suspicions, and erasing that database with the old list would be a sign of bad faith. The BNP won with that list, but its idea is to go for overkill.

^{13.} (C) Comment: Kamal Hossain's seemingly quixotic campaign to return Bangladeshi politics to the real or imagined idealism of a lost generation accounts for both his stature as Bangladesh's pre-eminent, and perhaps only, elder statesman and his limited political influence.

CHAMMAS